

**Course Title:** LNG 324: Semantics *3 hours, 3 credits.*

**Course Description:** Linguistic meaning, including word and sentence meaning, reference, and truth; connections among language, thought, and the world; speech act theory and formal semantic theory; metaphor and meaning in practice. PREREQ: LNG 160 (SPV 246).

**Location:** Speech/Theatre Building Room 203

**Meeting Days:** Tuesday & Thursday

**Time:** 9:30-10:45

**Instructor:** Michelle A. Johnson

**Email:** [mjohnson2@gc.cuny.edu](mailto:mjohnson2@gc.cuny.edu)  
[johnson.michelle.anne@gmail.com](mailto:johnson.michelle.anne@gmail.com)

**Office Hours:** Tuesdays 12:15-1:15 in the classroom OR(inclusive) by appointment.

**Textbook:** Kearns, Kate. 2011. *Semantics*. 2nd Edition. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

There will also be additional readings, podcasts and you tube videos posted to the course website which will help you throughout the course.

**Website:** <http://lng324.commonsgc.cuny.edu>

Course materials are available on this website. I will not be using blackboard, and there will not be any materials posted there.

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## Course Description

### *'What is meaning?'*

This course will introduce students to the study of formal meaning in Linguistics — and attempt to answer the question: how do we create meaning from the utterances we make? Semantics is the branch of Linguistics that studies meaning in a formal way. This is a much more difficult question than it appears on the surface. Since it is impossible to agree on even the meaning of the word 'meaning', linguists have adopted a system from logic (the intersection of Mathematics and Philosophy) that can begin to capture the decontextualized relationships between elements in a sentence. This logical system is what this course is about. Of course, there are intersections with Syntax, Pragmatics, and Phonology that will arise throughout the course, since none of these subfields exists without the others in a natural human language. Semantic tools allow us to propose answers to questions such as the following:

- Why does “He took the pills and went to the hospital” mean something different than “He went to the hospital and took the pills”?
- Why is “the” such a difficult word to explain to a non-native English speaker?
- Why you can say “I bought every bottle” but not “I bought every sand”?
- How there are 2 meanings to “Somebody loves everybody.”?
- Why it's funny to answer “Would you like coffee or tea?” With “Yes!”
- Why you can't “sleep the baby”?
- If you pause a marathon, are the runners “running”?
- Many more...

## Promises

By the end of this class, you will be able to:

- Explain why meaning is constructed by shared beliefs and experiences.
- Group the world into quantifiable and unquantifiable objects and point out the inconsistencies in natural language.
- Articulate the difference between Sense and Denotation (Reference), and how that relates to how we talk about ideas, objects and the world
- Explain what truth conditions are, why they are so important and how they relate to extensions and intensions of sentences.
- Identify how each natural language conjunction relates to predicate logic.
  - Calculate the logic of a natural language sentence.
- Use first order logic to create proofs of sentential relationships
- Explain the role argument structure has on sentences.
  - Compare the role a predicate has versus an argument on the structure of a sentence.
- Identify both of the Logical Quantifiers and articulate at least one scopal ambiguity problem.
- Analyze natural language quantifiers with respect to first order logic.
- Identify (an) aspect(s) of human language that are interesting, puzzling, humorous, etc. and analyze it in a formal, logical way.
- Propose, justify and evaluate an answer to the question “What is meaning?”
- Identify a naturally occurring language phenomenon, articulate the phenomenon using academic semantic language and provide an academic rationale for why it is interesting, situating the phenomenon with respect to the tools learned during the course.

## Format

This is largely a discussion course. Since the class is very small, the format will be mostly guided group discussions. Research on learning theory has shown that students learn best by asking questions and working together (Fagen, Crouch, & Mazur, 2002). This class is based on concepts and ideas – not memorizing content. Education itself is based on questions and answers (& the explanations) (Bain, 2004; Lang, 2010). Therefore, while this course will involve some lecturing by me, but you will [collectively] have to do the majority of the talking, and I will be guiding you along, asking further questions. The beginning of most classes will have a short writing assignment on the assigned reading to help you get your thoughts collected about the topic and then discussion. There will be times when you work in smaller groups i.e., the class will be split into 2 or 3 groups in order to discuss the ideas before discussing it all together. Group work is highly encouraged!

## Assignments

There are three types of assignments in this course, plus two take-home tests. These are described below. All assignments may be modified if you have a burning desire to do one type of project or another – just come talk to me about it.

### In-class writing assignments

These assignments will be given at the beginning of class most days. They will be in response to a question addressed by the reading, and in preparation for the topic for the day. They are designed to help you think about the reading with respect to the world around you – and how language is or is not used. Doing these short writing assignments will be helpful in finding and developing a SQUIB topic as well.

Grading for these writing assignments is on completion only. Since there is no opportunity for revision, I will not consider punctuation, spelling, etc. These writing assignments will form the basis of the discussion for the day, and are therefore essential in helping you sort through all of the complicated ideas that will be presented in this class.

### Homework

Homework is your opportunity to get feedback on your thinking about the ideas we will be covering and how they are used within linguistics and can apply to the world. Homework assignments can be done in groups, but if you work with a partner or group, all the group members' names need to appear on the paper (regardless if you turn it in separately or together). If you work in a group and everyone turns in the same assignment, you will get feedback via email or another electronic format. I prefer homework to be typed, but if that isn't possible (or is unreasonable as it will be for a couple assignments), please write legibly. Since you are taking the time to write it, I want to be able to read it. Grading is on completion only, and is your best chance to get good feedback. You may turn homework in via email to [johnson.michelle.anne@gmail.com](mailto:johnson.michelle.anne@gmail.com) or in class.

### Squib

A Squib is a very short paper that thoroughly presents a topic, problem or issue for further study, and may or may not present a solution. They were originally popularized by the journal, *Linguistic Inquiry*. The journal *Snippets* describes them as “the ideal footnote: a side remark that taken on its own is not worth lengthy development but that needs to be said” (Bhatt, Donati, & Percus, 2000). It is not a research paper, per se, but rather the presentation of a problem that may or may not be solvable. The goal is for you to think creatively about semantics, and introduce a topic you genuinely enjoy.

The Squib is your capstone assignment for this course. There will be much more discussion throughout the semester of what this entails specifically.

- The Squib also involves a presentation to the class during the last week of the semester. The purpose of this presentation is to get feedback in a more formal setting. Half of the presentation grade is your own presentation, the other half is actively participating in everyone else's presentations by asking questions and providing constructive feedback.

## Tests

- There are two tests, both of which are take-home. The purpose of these is to make sure you are developing Semantic Reasoning Skills in preparation for the SQUIB. Therefore, unlike the homework everyone will have to work individually and cite all of your sources using APA, MLA or your favorite citation method. This does not mean that you cannot talk about the answers with each other – only that all of the work must be your own, and any sources or classmates whose ideas you use have to be cited.

## Responsibilities

### Attendance

You are responsible to attend all meetings of class. It will be extremely difficult to absorb the concepts and ideas without attending all of the lectures. This class is small and highly participatory, and for that reason I do not have any attendance policy except that if you have to miss 2 classes or more in a row or more than 2 classes total, please come discuss it with me so you can recover the lost material and get feedback to complete the final project.

### Turning in work

This course involves short written assignments, homework, and a final paper building on the written assignments.

- The short written assignments will be given at the beginning of class, and discussed immediately afterwards and collected. Since they are an in-class exercise, I will not accept late ones. They do contribute to your grade, so if you will miss class, please let me know in advance so I can email you the assignment and you will still get feedback. If an emergency arises, be sure to contact me as soon as possible.
- Turning in (and doing) homework late is highly discouraged, but it will be accepted. Just like attendance, it will be very difficult to keep pace with the class if you are not keeping pace with the homework. If you turn in homework late, you will likely have a greater delay in getting the feedback. Unfortunately, I cannot accept homework in the last 2 weeks of the semester as I will not have time to give you constructive feedback. Therefore, the last day you can turn in homework is **November 26<sup>th</sup>**.
- The two tests will not be accepted late since we will be going over them the next day in class.
- The final paper (a SQUIB) will be accepted until December 17<sup>th</sup> at 5pm. You have as many opportunities as you like to get feedback until then and can submit as many drafts as you care to do until that point. Due to the time bound nature of the semester (it's an achievement – not an activity), I cannot accept late SQUIBS.

## Academic Integrity

*Stand on the shoulders of giants.<sup>1</sup>*

All students will uphold academic integrity and only engage in ethical intellectual conduct. This means students will not plagiarize, use fabricated data, present biased findings, or present opinions as fact.

## Plagiarism

1. Copying word for word someone else's work.
2. Paraphrasing someone else's ideas without giving credit to the original source (of the idea- not just the words).

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<sup>1</sup> This quote is currently Google Scholar's motto, but originally from Isaac Newton in a letter about his scientific discoveries "If I have seen far, it is because I am standing on the shoulders of giants" ("Standing on the shoulders of giants," 2013). It is also used in the free software movement, which is committed to the collaborative building of works by and for the people rather than ownership of our tools, efforts and creativity by corporations (Lessig, 2007). For more on this, visit [http://www.ted.com/talks/larry\\_lessig\\_says\\_theLaw\\_is\\_strangling\\_creativity.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/larry_lessig_says_theLaw_is_strangling_creativity.html)

- a. This includes sources taken from the internet. It is far better to cite webpages (including Wikipedia) and give credit where credit is due than to accidentally take someone else's idea or summary.
3. Not indicating which ideas are from someone else within the text. A list of sources at the end of a paper is not sufficient –readers cannot identify which ideas are the author's and which ideas are from another source.
4. Here: <http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/plagiarism/> is an excellent source for information about plagiarism. Here: <http://www.lehman.cuny.edu/student-affairs/documents/student-handbook-02.pdf> is Lehman's policy.

*The best measure of a man's honesty isn't his income tax return. It's the zero adjust on his bathroom scale. - Arthur C. Clarke*

## Technology

Students will utilize the course website to download supplemental readings, videos and podcasts. There is a link to the course webpage on the blackboard site, but the course materials will not be hosted on blackboard. I mostly use the course website and email. Therefore, it is very important that I have an email address for you that you regularly use.

For technology needs, students have access to the library, which has a multimedia lab as well, where all of these materials can be listened to/watched.

If you are having trouble with technology on campus, please call the Help Desk at 718-960-1111 or visit them in Carman Hall.

## Technology in the Classroom

If you are using your phone, laptop, ipad, etc. to take notes, look up things relevant to the course, make an ongoing list of Squib ideas, etc., I encourage you to bring your device. If it'll be a distraction, I encourage you to leave it in your bag as there will be significant amounts of group work and building this theory together – so distractions are just that: a “drawing away of the mind,” from Latin *distractio* (“the definition of distraction,” n.d.).

## Rights

### Disabilities

Lehman College is committed to providing access to all programs and curricula to all students. Students with disabilities who may need classroom accommodations are encouraged to register with the Office of Student Disability Services. Once you have registered, please bring me documentation from them for any assistance that you will need to help you succeed. Without documentation, I will not make accommodations. If you have specific accommodations that will help make you more successful, please tell me as early in the semester as possible.

For more information, please contact the Office of Student Disability Services, Shuster Hall, Room 238; phone number, 718-960-8441. Accommodations will only be granted with documentation

### Discrimination Policy

Lehman College does not discriminate on the basis of gender, sexual orientation, race, color, creed, national origin, religion, handicap, or political belief, in any of its educational programs and activities, including employment practices and its policies relating to recruitment and admission of students.

### Tutoring/Writing Center

The Academic Center for Excellence (ACE) and the Science Learning Center (SLC) are two of the tutoring centers on campus. The ACE provides appointment based and drop-in tutoring in the humanities, social sciences, and writing, as well as general writing and academic skills workshops. The

SLC provides drop-in tutoring for natural and computer science courses. To obtain more information about the ACE and the SLC, please visit their website at <http://www.lehman.edu/issp>, or please call the ACE at 718-960-8175, and the SLC at 718-960-7707.

## Grading

1. In class writing: 15%
2. Homework: 20%
3. Tests: 20%
4. Presentation: 15%
5. SQUIB: 30%

95-100%	A	83-86%	B	71-74%	C	60-65%	D
91-94%	A-	79-82%	B-	70-73%	C-	Below 60%	F
87-90%	B+	75-78%	C+	66-69%	D+		

## Tentative Schedule of Topics

### Key

### Date

General Topic Area

1. Specific points

Read: Do this before the NEXT class

Unless otherwise specified, the pages refer to pages in the Kearn book. Other reading assignments can be found on the webpage: <http://lng324.common.gc.cuny.edu>

Homework: Due the next class period (unless otherwise specified)

**Grid of Topics**

<b>Date</b>	<b>Topic</b>	<b>Reading</b>	<b>HW</b>
Aug 29	Intro / Meaning	Steven Pinker, <i>The Stuff of Thought</i> , Chapter 1	NONE
Sept 3	Cultural Root of Semantics	Up to section 1.4 (pg 12)	your semantic landscape
Sept 5	NO CLASS		
Sept 10	Meaning	1.4-end of Chpt 1	Exercise 1, 2, 3
Sept 12	Implicature & Presupposition	<a href="#">Spark Notes</a> <a href="#">Peter Williams</a>	NONE
Sept 17	Truth Tables	2.1 & 2.2 up to page 32	NONE
Sept 19	More Truth & TT	2.3	Pg 40, exercises 4, 5, 6 & Handout
Sept 24	Predicates & Arguments	<a href="#">Predicates Arguments</a>	Pg 41 (9) & Handout 3.3
Sept 26	Review & Make up	NONE	Test 1
Oct 1	Review test & Quantification	3.1, 3.2	NONE
Oct 3	Quantification	3.3 & 3.4	Pg 55, exercise (1) & (2)
Oct 8	Quantification	3.5	
Oct 10	Ambiguity	What is Syntax? ( <i>see below</i> ) Chapter 4 Intro, 4.1 & 4.2	Pg 56, exercise (4) & (7)
Oct 15	NO CLASS	CUNY MONDAY	
Oct 17	Syntax	4.3	
Oct 22	Functions & types	4.4 (long)	Pg 75 (1)
Oct 24	Lambdas	NONE	Pg 76 (3)
Oct 29	More lambdas	Chpt 5 Intro & 5.1	Pg 76 (5)
Oct 31	Modality	5.2 & 5.3	Modality HO
Nov 5	Modality		Pg 92 (1)
Nov 7	Counterfactuals	Chapter 8 Intro, 8.1 & 8.2	
	<b>5-7 pm</b>	<b>John McWhorter Colloquium at CUNY-GC</b>	
Nov 12	Aktionsarten	8.5 8.6 & 8.7 for Squib ideas	Pg 173 (1)
Nov 14	Verb classes	9.1, 9.2, 9.3	Pg 173 (2)
Nov 19	Tense & Aspect	9.4 & 9.5	NONE
Nov 21	More Tense & Aspect	NONE	Test 2
		<b>Test 2 DUE</b> <b>Squib Topic Due</b>	
Nov 28	NO CLASS	Happy Thanksgiving!	
Dec 3	Thematic Structure	10.4	Work on Squib
Dec 5	Theta Roles	NONE	Work on Squib
Dec 10 & 12	Presentations		
<b>Dec 17, 5pm</b>		<b>SQUIB DUE</b>	

**August August 29**

## Introduction to Class

1. Syllabus
2. Major Assignments
3. Semantics is Math
4. Pragmatics vs. Semantics
5. 'Dog'
6. How many different meanings does 'meaning' have?

Read: Steven Pinker, *The Stuff of Thought*, Chapter 1

Homework: None

**September September 3**

## Cultural Root of Semantics

1. Erin McKean: The Joy of Lexicography
  - a. How not prescriptive we will be
2. Patricia Kuhl
  - a. Cultural Root of Semantics and Language learning
    - i. Speech Community

Read: Intro Chpt 1 & 1.1 – 1.3

Homework: 1 page on your semantic landscape

**September 5**

NO CLASSES

**September 10**

## Meaning

1. Formal meaning
  - a. Denotation
  - b. Sense/Reference
2. Lexical vs. Structural Ambiguity
  - a. Exercise on advertising
3. Catemegoric vs. Syncatemegoric
  - a. Exercise on function words
4. Truth conditions
  - a. Denotations
  - b. Possible worlds
  - c. Truth Conditions
    - i. Entailments
    - ii. Contradictions

Read: 1.4-end of Chpt 1

Homework: Exercise 1, 2, 3

**September 12**

## Implicature &amp; Presupposition

1. Why is implicature different than entailment?
  - a. 'I broke a finger.'
2. Principles
  - a. Relevance
  - b. Informativeness
3. Presupposition
  - a. Survives Negation
4. Entailment
  - a. Does not survive negation

Read: [Spark Notes on Truth Tables](#)  
[Peter Williams on Truth Tables](#)

### September 17

Truth Tables – what they are and what they can mean

1. And
2. Or
  - a. Inclusive
  - b. Exclusive
3. Not

Read: 2.1 & 2.2 up to page 32

Homework: NONE

### September 19

More Practice with Truth and Truth Tables

1. Triples
2. But

Read: 2.3

Homework: Pg 40, exercises 4, 5, 6 & Handout

### September 24

Predicates and Arguments

1. 1, 2, 3 place predicates
  - a. Limitations on the world
  - b. Verbs
  - c. Adjectives
    - i. Bantu
  - d. Noun
  - e. Preposition
2. Argument structure

Read: Wikipedia on [Predicates](#) and [Arguments](#) – link is on the website.

Homework: Pg 41 exercise 9 & Handout 3.3

### September 26

1. Review Day – Truth Tables, Predicates and Arguments and the way the world is (or isn't)
2. Exercises

Read: NONE

Homework: Test 1

### October October 1

#### Test 1 DUE

1. Discussion of the Test
2. Introduction to Quantification

Read: 3.1, 3.2

Homework: NONE

### October 3

Quantification – One and All

1. The existential and universal quantifiers
  - a. It is the case
  - b. It is not the case

Read: 3.3 & 3.4

Homework: Pg 55, exercise (1) & (2)

**October 8**

One and All Part II

Intersective and Non-intersective Adjectives

1. Defining 'all' in terms of 'not one not'
2. Intersective & non-intersective adjectives

Read: 3.5

Homework: NONE

**October 10**

What makes it all interesting: Ambiguity!

1. Scopal ambiguity
2. I saw a man on the hill with a telescope.

Read: What is Syntax? Lexical Categories and Tree Structure ONLY – don't worry about movement or constituents. Chapter 4 Intro, 4.1 & 4.2

Homework: Pg 56, exercise (4) & (7)

**October 15**

**CUNY Monday – NO CLASS**

**October 17**

Hey, this isn't Syntax!

1. Trees
  - a. Phrases and units – VERY brief!
2. Types
  - a. A world of entities and truth
3. Functions
  - a. Back to predicates and arguments, but now as functions!

Read: 4.3

Homework: NONE

**October 22**

Functions, Types and Composition

1. Types of functions: building it up into compositional Semantics
2. Relationship between units and words
3. Syntax-Semantics interface

Read: 4.4 (long)

Homework: Pg 75 (1)

**October 24**

Lambdas

1. Lambda abstraction

Read: NONE

Homework: Pg 76 (3)

**October 29**

More Lambdas!

1. More work with lambdas

Read: Chapter 5 Intro & 5.1

Homework: Pg 76 (5)

**October 31**

**Happy Halloween!**

Ghosts and Otherworldly Creatures

1. Modality and possible worlds
  - a. Logical
  - b. Epistemic

## c. Deontic

Read: 5.2 &amp; 5.3

Homework: Modality HO

**November November 5**

More of the Other Worlds

1. Modality and Possible worlds
2. Counterfactuals

Homework: Pg 92 (1)

Read: NONE

**November 7****John McWhorter Colloquium at CUNY-GC 5-7pm (at 5<sup>th</sup> & 34<sup>th</sup>)**

"Is There No Such Thing as a Creole?"

Is it a Fact or isn't it!

1. More modality and counterfactuals
  - a. Discussion Questions on pg 92 & 93
2. Squib Topic Workshop

Homework: NONE

Read" Chapter 8 Intro, 8.1 &amp; 8.2

**November 12**

Verb Classes

1. Aktionsarten!
2. Vendler's Classes
  - a. Features
    - i. Telicity
    - ii. Durativity
    - iii. Static
  - b. The classes
    - i. States
    - ii. Activities
    - iii. Accomplishments
    - iv. Achievements
3. Diagnostics
  - a. In 10 minutes
    - i. Accomplishments ☺
    - ii. States ☹
    - iii. Activity ☹
    - iv. Achievements
      1. Time *before* the event takes place
  - b. It takes time
    - i. Accomplishments ☺
    - ii. Achievements ☺
    - iii. State ☺
    - iv. Activity ☹
  - c. For – (ever)
    - i. State ☺
    - ii. Activity ☺
    - iii. Accomplishment ☹
    - iv. Achievement ☺

Homework: Pg 173 (1)

Read 8.5 8.6 &amp; 8.7 for Squib ideas

**November 14**

More verb classes

1. More on Aktionsarten

Homework: Pg 173 (2)

Read: 9.1, 9.2 & 9.3

### **November 19**

Bringing it together in time

1. Tense and Aspect

Homework:

Read: 9.4 & 9.5

### **November 21**

At the end of time

1. Tense and Aspect
  - a. I didn't turn off the stove!
2. Review for Test 2

Homework: Test 2

Read: NONE

### **November 26**

**TEST 2 DUE**

**SQUIB TOPIC DUE**

**LAST DAY TO TURN IN HOMEWORK!**

Read: 10.1, 10.2

### **November 28**

**Happy Thanksgiving!**

### **December December 3**

Who does What: Thematic Structure

1. Thematic Roles

Homework: Work on Squib

Read: 10.4

### **December 5**

Finishing up theta roles

1. More on Theta Roles
  - a. Lexical Conceptual Structure

Homework: Work on Squib

### **December 10**

**PRESENTATIONS**

### **December 12**

**PRESENTATIONS**

### **December 17**

**5pm, SQUIB DUE**

### REFERENCES:

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Fagen, A. P., Crouch, C. H., & Mazur, E. (2002). Peer instruction: Results from a range of classrooms. *The Physics Teacher*, 40, 206.

Lang, J. M. (2010). *On Course: A Week-by-Week Guide to Your First Semester of College Teaching* (1st ed.). Harvard University Press.

Lessig, L. (2007). *Lawrence Lessig: Laws that choke creativity* | *Video on TED.com*. Retrieved from [http://www.ted.com/talks/larry\\_lessig\\_says\\_the\\_law\\_is\\_strangling\\_creativity.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/larry_lessig_says_the_law_is_strangling_creativity.html)

Standing on the shoulders of giants. (2013, August 7). In *Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia*. Retrieved from [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Standing\\_on\\_the\\_shoulders\\_of\\_giants&oldid=564811897](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Standing_on_the_shoulders_of_giants&oldid=564811897)

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<sup>i</sup> And who was Herbert H. Lehman anyhow??

NYS Governor 1932–1942

US Senator 1949–1954

A successful businessman, Herbert H. Lehman (1878–1963) proved to be an able and long-serving governor, helping to steer New York through the Great Depression. Lehman modeled state relief programs after President Roosevelt's national New Deal. Known as the "Little New Deal," these programs set a minimum wage, provided public housing, and increased unemployment insurance. It was during Lehman's tenure that the term for governor was lengthened to four years. Lehman resigned to become the first Director General of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration.

Co-sponsored the bill to oppose McCarthy-ism and was a major supporter of NAACP. From 1959 to 1961, he worked with Eleanor Roosevelt and others in a reform Democratic movement that led to the defeat of Tammany Hall boss Carmine DeSapio. Lehman was a noted philanthropist for numerous causes, and in 1960 he and his wife Edith donated \$500,000 to establish the Children's Zoo in Central Park (where adults could not go unless accompanied by an adult). Mostly taken from <http://www.hallofgovernors.ny.gov/HerbertLehman> (with some additions).